

Ethics in eSports

by

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ABSTRACT

ESports in general terms refers to the arena of sports taken to cyberspace. What were earlier considered to be just video games that were played majorly as a hobby and a pastime activity have now evolved into full time careers and have given rise to a billion dollar industry. There are actual eSports World championships being held around the globe. World of eSports has been enchanting people all over the world but what this has also meant is whatever issues plague the actual physical world of sports have also found their way into eSports. Lesser known names that are majorly exclusive to avid eSports watchers like Thomas Ronhaar and Alvaro Carreton to humongous worldwide figures like Elon Musk have found themselves embroiled in eSports controversy. What are these eSports issues and what can be done about them have been discussed in this research paper.

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eSports and ethics

So what does this mean? Well, eSports is the competitive scene for video games much like the professional scene in sports. For example, there are casters, analysts and statisticians among professionals that keep track of things that you would have in regular sports. eSports has grown over the past couple decades and has reached a point where ethics is becoming a major issue. In eSports today there are many games that have a very large followings such as League of Legends, Formula 1 and MotoGP. For instance, League of Legends had over a hundred million concurrent viewers in their past world's tournament. One big issue however that eSports is starting to have is that there are many young professionals in the scene and sometimes their maturity or decisions aren't up to par and they could make some mistakes.

One of the major scandals happened in Rocket League where one player's account was shared with another player. This meant that one player played on someone else's account. The reason that this happened was because the player that was playing was ineligible to play but was very talented. Another such controversy gripping the arena of eSports has to do with Formula 1 (hereinafter referred to as F1). F1 came up with this idea to make their actual F1 drivers race each other on their F1 game and stream the same to the whole world. Little did that know that this same attempt on their part during COVID-19 lockdown would give rise to a multi-million dollar online tournament. But this version of F1, much like its offline counterpart, had its fair share of controversy. From unsportsmanlike conduct to cheating allegations, it had it all. The one name that became popular for all the wrong reasons was Thomas Ronhaar. His on track and off track shenanigans made him the favorite target of online trolls. Justified or not and what ethical issues that highlights shall be discussed in this paper.

Among Us: Game where lying is key

One might have noticed certain type of games that's been getting a lot of attention lately. They're rather vaguely grouped together under the label *social deduction*¹ but there is one thing that they all seem to have in common, lying. In these games lying is an intended and core part of play and being good at lying is part of what it means to be a good player. It is majorly held

¹ PRESENTS OF MIND, <https://www.presentsofmind.com.au> (last visited Apr. 21, 2025).

common amongst players that social deception games are designed around deception as a core mechanic and so they are made vastly better when players engage in skillful deception. As per them, players should endorse the use of deception even if they end up on the receiving end because that's what makes the game fun for everyone and it would be irrational to do otherwise.

A question arises though 'isn't lying wrong?' Of course, lying can be good or at least excusable if it's being used to bring about something good or to prevent an even bigger harm but if you're just lying for personal gain or enjoyment like to win a game that's wrong, right? Are games like among us getting players to commit immoral acts? On one hand playing these games doesn't feel wrong and it's important to remember that deception is an important part of many games and most of those seem perfectly acceptable. On the other hand, our feelings and intuitions are not always the best guide for deciding what's right and wrong and if lying in games is okay we can still ask why and what's so special about games that they make bad behavior good.

There are a few possible answers. The first and perhaps the most common is that the rules of these games make lying okay. Lying is either allowed or required by the rules so it's okay. But this isn't a great answer since rules don't actually determine what is morally right or wrong so that won't do. Next you could say that's everyone knows you're supposed to lie and everyone thinks it is okay and therefore it is okay. But this isn't a great answer either. It's just an appeal to a social convention and that's not a reliable guide when it comes to questions of morality.

The philosopher Thomas Carson has an interesting solution. He argues that lying in games isn't really lying at all because lying can only exist in situations where you're morally obliged to tell the truth. For example, no one accuses actors of lying because acting is not a context where there is a moral obligation to tell the truth. Same thing goes for games.

But that argument only seems to apply to lying if by lying you just mean saying things that aren't true. However what we're really concerned about is deception and lying is just one way that you can deceive someone. Deception is much broader than just saying something that isn't true. Deception is anything done with the intent to make someone has worse beliefs and you can do that by telling the truth or not saying anything at all. So Carson's solution is not as general as we need it to be.

Doping in eSports

eSports is a multi-million dollar industry that captivates millions worldwide but behind the screens there's a darker side and ethical challenges including cheating, doping and other ethical issues marring eSports. The use of tools and taking advantage of game defects are common forms of cheating in eSports. These give an unfair advantage. It can occur in recreational gaming as well as competitive gaming and is popularly known as *e-doping*.

Some examples of e-doping:

1. Software cheat programs, for instance, can give a player the capability to see through a wall such as wall hacks or aim bots. Because anti-cheating software and other anti-cheating procedures must be created and put into place, publishers and organizers must pay competition money to combat cheating.
2. Doping is the use of banned athletic performance enhancing drugs by Esports competitors. In eSports cognitive enhancing drugs are the most widely used as they allow players to be alert and focus on the match for much longer. Borderline legal substances are commonly used including energy drinks, coffee, beer, herbs and other available medicines. The results still indicate infrequent use of illicit substance and prescription drugs. Consuming substances like Adderall or Ritalin to improve focus, reaction times, and reduce fatigue during eSports tournaments.
3. Account boosting is another phenomenon where one person plays for another by using that other person's account. One of the most high profile person involved in this saga is Elon Musk, wherein he was accused of boosting his game profile in Diablo IV and Path of Exile II.
4. Another example of software cheat codes entered into the game which give an unfair advantage are DDOS (distributed denial of service) attacks. In this, the online connection of other players is targeted to completely shut it off for hours on end sometimes.

F1 eSports controversy

First up is Alvaro Carreton, who regrettably used cheats to expose himself on an F1 live before removing the stream in reaction. Alvaro said in a statement on Twitter (now, X) that codemastersEA had requested him to do this. Following this remark, a codemastersEA official

on F1 eSports claimed that they had not requested anyone to do this and that they had not contacted any drivers requesting that they use these hacks or anything similar.

Taking our attention to the most recent and also the biggest eSports controversy involving Thomas Ronhaar. Jarno Opmeer, the three time F1 eSports champion has openly challenged Ronhaar's credentials by suggesting Ronhaar uses cheats in F1 eSports tournaments. This reached a highpoint when he called Ronhaar "a f*ing cheat" on YouTube livestream during one of the eSports race events. Story of Thomas Ronhaar is not limited to Jarno Opmeer though. He has managed to pretty much piss off every other player on the rostrum. Freddie Rasmussen, another experienced F1 eSports veteran and the first F1 eSports Champion, visibly got irate with Thomas Ronhaar's actions and in the middle of a live event decided to ruin his race and purposefully run into Ronhaar's car as to him at the time seeing Ronhaar not win by using such dirty tactics meant more than himself securing a decent points finish.

It feels like this F1 eSports cheating narrative will never end. It continues to expand, and it appears that we have actually found a serious problem with the F1 eSports scene. It began with accusations of cheating against Thomas Ronhaar and a number of other elite competitors, followed by Alvaro Carreton inadvertently displaying F1 cheats during a live stream. Jarno Opmeer, the current F1 eSports World Champion, then gave a detailed interview in which he discussed what he thinks is happening in the F1 eSports scene right now and what can be done to try and stop it.

F1 eSports events require top of the line racing simulators which cost a pretty penny. These eSports superstars have either deep pockets of their own or manage to secure sponsorships from advertising partners. The fact that these competitions provide such high winning bounties, F1 eSports gives away \$1 Million to the series winner, means that there are some players who are unable to resist the temptation to use cheat programs which will help them surpass the honest players and would make them look much better than they actually are. By having access to money, they use a small chunk of it to enlist the help of custom codemakers to provide them cheat access by developing codes for them that they can use in such tournaments. Financially, a sound decision as the upturn would be a million dollars in return.

But a player who is mediocre on his best days is now suddenly winning races after races and tournaments after tournaments; that doesn't happen because that player has overnight found a pool of talent that he never before had. The fact that these events could be participated by players sitting in the comfort of their homes meant that there was never enough supervision on board from the very beginning.

Possible light at the end of the tunnel

The major reason that this happens is because there is no authority that could govern eSports. Like FIA regulates F1 and FIM does so for MotoGP, there should be a centralized authority to govern eSports too. That authority could prescribe the rules and regulations for every element concerning eSports, be it the playing conditions, prohibition on consumption of performance enhancing drugs to even basic sportsmanship code. The eSports players are by their nature very competitive and would be taking advantage of any loophole that they can find. Imagine what they would do when there is nothing to control their actions. Even though individual eSports events do come up with their rules, they are never as exhaustive and vary from one event to another. If something is allowed in one event and there is uncertainty about its applicability in another, why wouldn't these performance chasing players not exploit this grey area to their advantage. Given the fact that performance margins are so minimal between these players, any added benefit that they can take they would.

One immediate solution to tackle one of the issues was implemented in recently concluded F1 eSports Championship — conducting LAN events². This refers to every player being assembled in a common area and then the event organizers providing the players with the same equipment which has been thoroughly checked before the commencement of the event. This would completely remove the doubts regarding anyone's achievements and would allow actual talents to rise above the mediocre. The latest F1 eSports championship that saw these very same conditions implemented gave us an answer we all knew from the very beginning. Winner — not Thomas Ronhaar, but rather Jarno Opmeer.

² ESPORTS CHARTS, <https://escharts.com> (last visited on Apr. 23, 2025).